



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Papua New Guinea

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country is an island nation with an area of 280,773 square miles, and its population is approximately 5.4 million. According to the 2000 census, the churches with the largest number of members are the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the United Church, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. At that time, 96 percent of citizens identified themselves as members of a Christian church. Minority religions include the Baha'i Faith and Islam; there are approximately 40,000 Baha'is, according to Baha'i leadership, and 1,000 to 2,000 Muslims in the country. Many citizens combine their Christian faith with some traditional indigenous practices.

Traditional Christian churches proselytized on the island in the 19th century. Colonial governments initially assigned different missions to different geographic areas. Since territory in the country is aligned strongly with language group and ethnicity, this colonial policy led to the identification of certain churches with certain ethnic groups. However, churches of all denominations now are found in all parts of the country. The Muslim community has a mosque in the capital of Port Moresby.

Nontraditional Christian churches and non-Christian religious groups are active throughout the country. According to the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches, both Muslim and Confucian missionaries have become active, and foreign missionary activity in general is high. The Pentecostal Church in particular has found converts within the congregations of the more established churches, and many movements and faiths that proselytize have representatives in the country. The Summer Institute of Linguistics is an important missionary institution; it translates the New Testament into hundreds of native languages.

The Roman Catholic Church is the only traditional church that still relies to a large extent on foreign clergy.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full, and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution's provisions for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion consistently have been interpreted to mean that any religion may be practiced or propagated as long as it does not interfere with the freedom of others. The predominance of Christianity is recognized in the preamble of the Constitution, which refers to "our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours"; however, there is no state religion.

During the period covered by this report, government officials, including the Governor-General and the Prime Minister, attended rallies held by visiting Christian evangelists.

In general, the Government does not subsidize the practice of religion. The Department of Family and Church Affairs has a nominal policymaking role that largely has been confined to reiterating the Government's respect for church autonomy.

Churches built and continue to run most of the country's schools and many of its health services, and the Government provides support for those institutions. At independence, the Government recognized that it had neither the funds nor the personnel with which to take over these institutions and agreed to subsidize their operations on a per pupil or per patient basis. The Government also pays the salaries of national teachers and health staff. Although the education and health infrastructures continue to rely heavily on church-run institutions, some schools and clinics have closed periodically because they did not receive the promised government support. These problems are due in part to endemic financial management problems in the Government.

Immigrants and non-citizens are free to practice their religion, and foreign missionary groups are permitted to proselytize and engage in other missionary activities.

Religious holidays include Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas Day.

It is the policy of the Department of Education to set aside one hour per week for religious instruction in the public schools. Church representatives teach the lessons, and the students attend the class that is operated by the church of their parents' choice. Children whose parents do not wish them to attend the classes are excused. Members and leaders of non-Christian religions are not prevalent in the country, and it was not known if non-Christian religions have representatives to teach lessons.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period of the report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

As new missionary movements proliferate, representatives and individuals of some established churches have questioned publicly whether such activity is desirable. However, the courts and government practice have upheld the constitutional right to freedom of speech, thought, and belief, and no legislation to curb those rights has been adopted.

In the past, there were incidents of discrimination against recently arrived Muslim immigrants, but there were no reports of such incidents during the period covered by this report.

The Council of Churches makes the only known effort at interfaith dialogue. The council members consist of the Anglican, Gutnius and Union Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, and United churches, and the Salvation Army. In addition, 15 parareligious organizations, including the Young Women's Christian Association, participate in its activities; however, the self-financing council has only Christian affiliates. The ecumenical work of the Council of Churches is confined primarily to cooperation among churches on social welfare projects.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Ambassador continued discussions with the Council of Churches and individual church leaders. The Ambassador and Embassy officials met with religious leaders to discuss their role in social issues and continued to meet regularly with U.S. citizen missionaries of all denominations.

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